

Chapter 112

al-Ikhlāṣ (Sincerity)

Verses 1-4

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful

This sūrah was revealed in Mecca and consists of 4 verses. It describes God through the following qualities: (1) He has an absolutely one essence. (2) Everything other than Him resort to Him for their existential needs. (3) Nothing ever shares at all in His essence, attributes or acts. This is the Qur'anic monotheism, which is an exclusive feature of the Holy Qur'an, and upon which is built all Islamic teachings.

There are many narrations about the merits of this sūrah, to the point that both Sunnis and Shias relate that it is equal to a third of the Qur'an. We will present them below, God-willing.

The chapter could have been revealed in either Mecca or Medina. However, some accounts about its context of revelation suggest that it was revealed in Mecca.

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ

(112:1) *Say: Behold (huwa), Allah is the Unique (aḥad)*

The pronoun *huwa* (lit. he, it) is a reference to the present situation or story (called *ḍamīr al-sha'n* or *ḍamīr al-qisṣah*). It serves to highlight the importance of the sentence that comes after it.¹ As with the word *Allah*, it is a proper noun for God in Arabic, just as the divine has its own names in other languages. We had some discussion on this in our exposition of

¹ This kind of pronoun neither has an antecedent, nor is the subject of a sentence. The verse would be a complete sentence without it. It can be translated as “this”—used to draw the audience’s attention to a subject. For instance, one may point to the Qur’an and say: “This! The Qur’an is your solution.” That is why it can also be translated as “behold, lo, look.” (Ed.)

Sūrah al-Fātiḥah.¹

Aḥad (the one, the only) is an adjective derived from *waḥdah* (unity, oneness), like *wāḥid* (one, unit). However, *aḥad* can only be applied to something that is not subject to any plurality whatsoever, whether externally or mentally. For that reason, it is not used for counting, unlike *wāḥid*. For every *wāḥid* of something, there is a second and a third which either exist presently in the external reality, or can be perceived in the mind and imagined to exist. Therefore, the *wāḥid* can potentially become many. Meanwhile, if one were to suppose a second for something that is described as *aḥad*, then that second would reduce to the very first item, without adding anything to it.

This can be seen in how two words are commonly used in Arabic. When one says, “No one (*aḥad*) came here,” it negates the coming of not only one person, but also two and more. But when one says, “Not one (*wāḥid*) came here,” it only negates the coming of one person specifically, without ruling out the possibility that two or more individuals may have come. Because *aḥad* has this meaning, it is only used in negations. The only case where it conveys an affirmative sense is with reference to the Almighty God. This is reflected elegantly in a sermon by Imam ‘Alī describing the absolute oneness of God (*tawḥīd*): “Anything that is described by oneness (*waḥdah*) is little, except Him.” We presented some of the Imam’s words about *tawḥīd* in our discussion on this subject in Sūrah al-Mā’idah.²

اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ

(112:2) *Allah is the Ultimate Recourse* (al-ṣamad)

The root meaning of *ṣamad* is “seeking” or “seeking and relying upon.”³ Exegetes have offered several interpretations for this adjective, but most of them boil down to “a chief or master who is sought and resorted to.” That is, one to whom people refer for their needs. Since it is mentioned in an unqualified form in this verse, it means “One Who is sought out for all needs.”

If God is the One Who gives existence to all other beings, it follows that

1 See volume 1, pp. 44-45 of the English translation, under verse 1:1. (Ed.)

2 See volume 11, pp. 110ff of the English translation, under verses 5:68-86. (Ed.)

3 It is used as *ṣamadahu yasmuduhu ṣamadan*, meaning “he sought it” or “he sought it and relied upon it.” (Auth.)

any being which can be called a “thing” (*shayʾ*)—other than Him—would entirely depend on Him: not only for its original essence and existence, but also for all its properties and traits. He says: *Look! All creation and command belong to Him* (7:54). He also says: *And the end of it all is your Lord* (53:42), where the word *al-muntahá* (the end, the terminus, the goal) is stated in an unqualified form. This means that He is the ultimate end that is sought (*al-ṣamad*) in every need and desire. Whatever is sought, the search ultimately ends in Him. It is He Who brings every search to fruition and fulfills every need.

This should clarify why the word *ṣamad* is preceded by the definite article *al-* (the): the article signifies that God alone is the absolute object that is sought out. There is no such article before *aḥad* in the first verse because the meaning of *aḥad* (unique, one and only) is only applicable to God. The word cannot be used to describe anything else as an affirmative attribute. That is why it does not need the article *al-* to signify exclusivity (*ḥaṣr*) or reference to a known subject (*ʿahd*).

Instead of repeating the word *Allah*, the verse could have used a pronoun: “He is the Ultimate Recourse”; or the two verses could have been merged: “Allah is the Unique and the Ultimate Recourse.” However, the subject [Allah] is repeated to show that each sentence alone suffices to describe and introduce God. This is in line with the theme and purpose of the chapter, which is “defining”¹ God with descriptions that are specific to Him. Hence the desired knowledge of God can be achieved by either of these two independent statements: *Allah is the Unique* (112:1) and *Allah is the Ultimate Recourse* (112:2).

The two verses together describe God through His *essence* and His *acts*, respectively. The first verse—*Allah is the Unique* (112:1)—describes God’s uniqueness, which is the core of His essence. The second verse—*Allah is the Ultimate Recourse* (112:2)—describes him as the Source at which everything ends and to which all return. That would be a description of His acts.

Some have interpreted *ṣamad* as *muṣmat*, which means “full, filled, solid, not hollow.” This meaning refers to how God does not eat, does not drink, does not sleep, is not born, and does not give birth. Therefore, the next verse—*He begets not, nor is He begotten* (112:3)—would be an

¹ The word “define” is not used in its literal and accurate sense, which is to set the boundaries and limits of something. It is used loosely in its more conventional and everyday sense. (Ed.)

interpretation of *ṣamad* (112:2).

لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ ۖ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ ۝

(112:3-4) *He begets not, nor is He begotten. Nor has He any equal.*

These two noble verses negate a few things about God: (1) Giving birth to anything, which means something of His own kind splitting off from Him. This would include any sense or manner of splitting and derivation, such as what the Christians hold about the Messiah—that he is the son of God—and what the idolaters hold about some of their gods—that they are God’s children. (2) Having been born from another being and derived from it. This would also include any sense or manner of splitting and derivation, such as what the idolaters hold about their gods, where some of them sire or give birth to others, while some are the children of other gods. (3) Having any peer or counterpart that parallels Him in His essence or acts¹—namely, giving existence to the beings (*ijād*), and directing their affairs (*tadbīr*). No one in the world—including the followers of any religion and others—has ever claimed that there is an equal for God in His *essence*, in the sense that there are multiple Necessary Beings. However, they consider Him to have counterparts on the plane of *actions*, which is managing the affairs of the universe. Some human deities, like the Pharaoh and Nimrod, made claims to being gods and worthy of worship. Their criterion for setting someone equal to God was having independent authority in managing what has been delegated to them. They viewed God as being an independent authority who manages the other lower authorities. Hence, they are the lords and gods, while He is the Lord of lords and the God of gods.

This sense of equality and parallelism to God can also be ascribed to a contingent being that is held to have some independence in its actions. That would also amount to being sufficient of God [in a certain domain]. However, all contingent beings are in need of Him. Thus, this verse also negates this sense of equality.²

- 1 We did not mention attributes because God’s attributes are either attributes of essence or attributes of action. The former are identical with the divine essence, and the latter are derived from the divine acts. (Auth.)
- 2 In other words, considering any act, force or being in the world to be independent of God in its effect would be contrary to the verse, *Nor has He*

It is possible to derive these three negations from God's uniqueness (*aḥadiyyah*, 112:1). However, the mind jumps quicker to the view that they derive from His quality of being the absolute and final recourse (*ṣamadiyyah*, 112:2). The derivation of these three negations from God's attribute of *ṣamad* can be elaborated as follows:

- (1) *He begets not* (112:3). (a) Begetting is a type of division and partition, in one way or another, no matter how it is interpreted. (b) Division implies composition of parts. (c) A compound necessarily depends on its parts [for its completion and wholeness]. (d) *Allah is the Ultimate Recourse* (112:2), Whom is depended upon and sought out by any being which has a need, while Himself is free from all need. (e) Hence: *He begets not* (112:3).
- (2) *Nor is He begotten* (112:3). (a) Being born from something means that the child depends on the parent for its existence (b) *Allah is the Ultimate Recourse* (112:2), Who is free from all need. (c) Hence: *Nor is He begotten* (112:3).
- (3) *Nor has He any equal* (112:4). (a) A being would not be an equal or counterpart (*kuf'*) to another being—whether in essence or actions—unless it is independent and needless of it in the domain of its equality. (b) *Allah is the Ultimate Recourse* (112:2), upon Whom all other beings depend in every imaginable way. (c) Hence: *Nor has He any equal* (112:4).

Therefore, it should be clear that the negations in these two verses [114:3-4] derive from God's attribute of *ṣamad* (the Absolute, the Ultimate Recourse; 112:2). If we add up these descriptions—that is, *ṣamad* and its implications—they amount to God's absolute oneness in His essence, attributes and acts. The conclusion is that God is One, and there is nothing that would compare or compete with Him. The divine essence exists for itself and by itself, without relying on anything else or needing any other being. The same can be said about His attributes and actions. Meanwhile, the essence, attributes and actions of things other than Him emanate from Him, in a way that is suitable for His majesty and grandeur. In sum, this chapter describes God as being *the one and only*.

Some have interpreted *equal* (112:4) as a spouse, because one's spouse is one's equal and counterpart (*kuf'*). Therefore, the verse can be compared to: *And exalted be the glory of our Lord, He has taken neither any spouse*

(72:3). The problem with this view should be clear.¹

Examining Narrations

- (1) The Jews asked the Messenger of God, "Tell us the *nisbah* (lineage, identity) of your Lord." The Prophet waited for three days and did not respond to them. Then God revealed, *Say: Behold, Allah is the Unique...* (112:1-4).²

Author's comment: Narrations differ as to who the questioner was: (1) ʿAbd-Allāh b. Šūriyā, the Jew.³ (2) ʿAbd-Allāh b. Salām, who asked this in Mecca, whereby he converted to Islam but hid his belief. (3) Some Jews. (4) The polytheists in Mecca.⁴ In any case, God's *nisbah* means a description of His qualities and properties.⁵

- (2) Imam ʿAlī said: God's *nisbah* (identity, family tree, description) is: *Say: Behold, Allah is the Unique...* (112:1-4).⁶
- (3) During the Prophet's ascension (*miʿrāj*), God told him: Recite, *Say: Behold, Allah is the Unique...* (112:1-4) as I have revealed, for this is indeed My genealogy (*nisbah*) and description.⁷
- (4) The Prophet said: Chapter 112 is one third of the Qur'an.⁸

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- 1 The problem with this interpretation is that it involves an unwarranted imposition of meaning on the verse. The verse negates any kind of equal or counterpart whatsoever, which is not limited to a spouse. (Ed.)
 - 2 *Al-Kāfi*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Muḥammad b. Muslim, from Imam al-Šādiq.
 - 3 *Al-Iḥtijāj*, from Imam al-ʿAskarī.
 - 4 The last three views are found in a number of Sunni narrations. (Auth.)
 - 5 *Nasab* and *nisbah* refer to one's lineage, which was a typical way of describing people at that time. (Trans.)
 - 6 *Maʿānī al-akhbār*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Asbagh b. Nubātah, part of a longer hadith.
 - 7 *ʿIlal al-sharāʿi*, via its chain of narration, from Imam al-Šādiq. It has also narrated the same idea from Imam al-Kāẓim, via its chain of narration.
 - 8 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Abū ʿUbayd's *al-Faḍāʾil*, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās. There are numerous narrations from the Prophet through Sunni chains of transmission which express the same idea, on the authority of a number of Companions, including Ibn ʿAbbās, Abū al-Dardāʾ, Ibn ʿUmar, Jābir, Ibn Masʿūd, Abū al-Saʿīd al-Khudrī, Muʿadh b. Anas, Abū Ayyūb, Abū Umāmah and others. It is also related in a number of narrations

Author's comment: There are different views on what it means for this sūrah to be a third of the Qur'an, but the most fitting view is that Qur'anic teachings unravel into three principles: (1) monotheism; (2) prophethood; (3) afterlife. This sūrah covers one of the three, which is monotheism.

- (5) Imam 'Alī said: "I dreamt of al-Khiḍr the night before the battle of Badr, and told him, 'Teach me something by which I may defeat the enemy.' He suggested, 'Say: O He! O Who there is no he but Him (*yā huwa, yā man lā huwa illa huwa*).' Next morning I related this to the Messenger of God, who commented, 'O 'Alī! You have been taught the Greatest Name (*al-ism al-a'zam*).' So that was on my tongue during the day of Badr." After reciting Chapter 112, Imam 'Alī would say: "O He, O Who there is no he but Him, forgive me and help me against the disbelievers."¹
- (6) Imam 'Alī said: He is One (*al-aḥad*), but not in a numerical sense.²
- (7) Once Imam al-Jawād was asked: "What does *ṣamad* (112:2) mean?" He said: "A chief and master to whom people resort for anything minor or major."³

Author's comment: There are other interpretations of *ṣamad* related from the Imams:

- (8) Imam al-Bāqir said: *Ṣamad* is a superior, above whom there is no other commander or authority.⁴
- (9) Imam al-Ḥusayn said: *Ṣamad* is that which is not hollow. *Ṣamad* is that which does not sleep. *Ṣamad* is that which has always been and shall always be.⁵
- (10) Imam al-Sajjād said: *Ṣamad* is the One Who, when He wills anything, He say to it "Be," and it is [36:82], *Ṣamad* is the One Who originated all things and created them as opposites with different forms and types, while maintaining oneness and singularity

from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt.

- 1 *Al-Tawḥīd*.
- 2 *Nahj al-balāghah*. This is also narrated from Imam al-Riḍā in *al-Tawḥīd*, except that it says *aḥad* instead of *al-aḥad*.
- 3 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim al-Ja'farī.
- 4 *Ma'ānī al-akhbār*.
- 5 *Ma'ānī al-akhbār*.

exclusively to Himself, free from all opposite, form, likeness and peer.¹

Author's comment: The central meaning of *ṣamad* is what we have related from Imam al-Jawād [number 7] because it is based on the etymological root of the word, which signifies "seeking." The other interpretations narrated from the Imams are the *implications* of this original and root meaning. They are derived from the fact that God is the ultimate point of reference for all things in all needs. Hence, He is the final end, Who is Himself free from all needs.

- (11) The people of Basra wrote to Imam al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī asking him about the meaning of *ṣamad* (112:2). He wrote back to them: In the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful. Do not delve recklessly into the Qur'an. Do not argue over it. Do not say anything about it without knowledge. For indeed I heard my grandfather, the Messenger of God, say: "Whoever speaks about the Qur'an without knowledge shall take their seat in the fire." God has Himself interpreted *ṣamad*. He says: *Allah is the Unique. Allah is the Ultimate Recourse* (112:1-2), then He interprets that by saying: *He begets not, nor was He begotten. Nor has He any equal* (112:3-4).²
- (12) Imam al-Kāẓim said: Know that God, is One (*wāḥid*), Unique (*aḥad*) and Absolute (*ṣamad*). He begets not, such that He might be inherited. Nor is He begotten, such that He might have a partner.³
- (13) Imam ʿAlī said in a sermon: [He is] One Who is not begotten so that He would be a partaker in might. Nor does He beget so that He might be inherited and subject to death.⁴
- (14) Imam ʿAlī said in a sermon: He is far exalted of having any equal to whom He may be compared.⁵

Author's comment: There are further narrations which convey the

¹ *Maʿānī al-akḥbār*.

² *Al-Tawḥīd*, on the authority of Wahab b. Wahab al-Qurashī, from Imam al-Ṣādiq, from his fathers.

³ *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Ibn Abī ʿUmayr.

⁴ *Al-Tawḥīd*.

⁵ *Al-Tawḥīd*.

aforementioned meanings.¹



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- ¹ Controversies and disagreements over religious statements are significantly a result of not having a clear notion of God. Before stating anything related to religion—whether descriptive, in the form of *is*, or prescriptive, in the form of *ought to be*—one must first define what they mean by God. When the subject is vague and unknown, how can one predicate anything on it? There is often a primitive image of God as an anthropomorphic artisan who is subject to the passage of time like us. This chapter, the author’s exposition of it, and the narrations above, provide us with a clear, consistent and profound view of God which can be a solid basis for developing coherent religious beliefs and practices. The problem with thinking of God primarily as “the Creator” is that it lends itself to an anthropomorphic, temporal and dualistic notion of the divine principle. The same can be said about viewing God as the King, or even as the Beloved. Instead, this chapter describes God as the one and only true being, the absolute, the infinite, the colorless, the all-present, the matchless, the underlying ground of existence. An indispensable prerequisite for having any glimpse of the divine is realizing *timelessness*. Though this is a rare experience, it can be achieved through the cessation of *preferring* any manifestation of being over another, which is the only sin ultimately. That is the practice of *equanimity*. The idea that God is not bound by temporality can be deduced from verse 112:3. (Ed.)